

Turning Away from the Middle East

Steven Simon

The Biden administration will seek to rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran, but its main focus will be on domestic affairs and relations with China.

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Essam al-Sudani/Reuters

University students protesting American and Iranian intervention in Iraq, Basra, January 8, 2020

The Biden administration will not have a lot of time for the Middle East. Its foreign policy agenda will more likely be shaped by the looming question of how to come to grips with Xi Jinping's China. The Middle East, with the significant exception of Iran, poses no plausible serious challenge to US interests. There is also a lack of resources and opportunities to advance them. This is in part a legacy of the decades-long war in Iraq, which cost trillions of dollars and exhausted US ground forces, while compromising America's international reputation; regime change in Libya, which prompted the return of thousands of jihadists and a civil war that immiserated the country; and the Syrian civil war, which Washington prolonged and intensified by inadvertently supplying jihadists with potent weaponry. And in part this turning away from the Middle East reflects changes in the oil market: the US is the world's largest producer of fossil fuels, the cost of renewable energy is dropping sharply, electric vehicles dominate new production in the automotive sector, and the effects of global warming are lending urgency to a shift away from oil.

By the end of Obama's second term, the lingering illusions that led to those consequences in Iraq, Syria, and Libya had dissipated. In 2016, Obama, apparently referring to what he had called a "shit show" in

Libya, told one senator, “There is no way we should commit to governing the Middle East and North Africa. That would be a basic, fundamental mistake.”¹

One suspects that he already held this view by the middle of his first term, as the Arab Spring was imploding, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu collaborated with the Republicans to humiliate him before two joint sessions of Congress, and the Arab Gulf states made it known that they considered him unreliable, even feckless. Obama had earned this battering by saying things out loud that everyone knows but are not supposed to be said: that Israeli settlements in the West Bank are an obstacle to peace with the Palestinians; that the border between Israel and a Palestinian state should be based on the June 1967 armistice line and adjusted through land swaps; that the Saudis must “find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace”; and that US interests were shifting toward the Pacific, requiring it to “rebalance” its diplomatic and military commitments accordingly.

In the 2012 presidential election Mitt Romney, his Republican opponent, claimed that Obama had “thrown Israel under the bus” and “disrespected” it, even as the White House produced a stream of fact sheets showing that military assistance to Israel had reached record levels during his first term. (Those levels would be exceeded in his second term.) As it turned out, the Middle East—even the image of Israel flattened by the Democratic bus—was not a major factor for Jewish voters, who voted for the two parties in more or less the same ratio as they had in previous elections. The lesson for those who noticed was that most Jewish voters were not going to be swayed by policy toward Israel. The sensible approach for the White House was to go along with Israeli requests for aid that Congress would grant anyway, as long as Israel did not undermine US strategic interests by, for instance, bombing Iran while the US, the permanent members of the UN Security Council, and the EU were negotiating limits on its nuclear program. On strategic matters, the White House gets to decide.

In some ways, Trump continued Obama’s Middle East policy. The latter had delegated the peace process to John Kerry on the assumption that it would be fruitless. Trump’s approach was predicated on the same insight, and he developed the idea of an economic peace between Israel and Palestinians on the West Bank, financed by the Gulf states, that would not require political concessions neither side was prepared to make. The Palestinian leadership, isolated within the Arab world and repudiated by Trump, would finally awaken to the inevitability of compromise or, if one prefers, surrender. This was known as the Kushner plan, after Trump’s son-in-law Jared, who drafted it.

Despite some over-the-top admiration for the dictatorial instincts of Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammad bin Salman, Trump's position toward these governments was not markedly different from his predecessor's. The Obama administration had pushed large-scale arms sales to both countries through Congress despite the opposition of its own party, maintained close contact with the Saudi government, helped the Saudis arm Syrian rebels, and collaborated in the Saudi and Emirati war in Yemen. The real issue dividing Obama and Saudi Arabia was the nuclear deal with Iran. For the Saudis, this was in the category of original sin, an indelible stain that no amount of diplomacy could rinse out.

In 2014 Trump derided Obama's catering to Saudi Arabia's defense-related requests, tweeting, "Saudi Arabia should fight their own wars, which they won't, or pay us an absolute fortune to protect them and their great wealth-\$ trillion!" This attitude shifted as Saudi capital bailed out bad investments by the Trump-Kushner clan. Trump acknowledged his dependency as early as 2015: "Saudi Arabia, I get along with all of them. They buy apartments from me. They spend \$40 million, \$50 million. Am I supposed to dislike them? I like them very much."

There were two Trump initiatives that reshaped the situation in the Middle East now faced by the Biden administration. In 2018 Trump withdrew the US from the nuclear agreement with Iran. In addition to reimposing sanctions against Iran that had been suspended under the deal, Washington imposed other punitive sanctions under laws relating to terrorism and human rights. After about a year, Iran began to activate dormant centrifuges and enrich uranium by a small percentage above that allowed by the deal. Tehran has now limited access to IAEA inspectors and enriched some uranium to 20 percent, a major advance toward weapons-grade fuel. These symbolic steps were meant to put pressure primarily on the Europeans to defy the threat of secondary US sanctions that deterred them from trading with Iran. This ploy proved largely ineffective, and Iran, as a result, has few options for selling its oil, the main source of government revenue.

The US withdrawal from the agreement failed to compel Iran to enter into negotiations over a broader and more restrictive one. As the Trump administration drew to a close, the US and Iran remained at a standoff. In late December the Pentagon sent a nuclear submarine armed with 154 cruise missiles into the Gulf and staged two deployments of B-52 bombers to the region. This came amid fears of impending Iranian retaliation for the killing of Iran's Quds Force commander, Qassim Suleimani, in January 2020 in a US drone strike and of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a scientist who oversaw the country's nuclear efforts, in November 2020, presumably by Israel.

Fakhrizadeh's assassination was widely interpreted as a spoke in the wheels of renewed talks between the Biden administration and Tehran.

Iran's leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, in a December 16 speech, made it clear that Iran would not rise to the bait. Four days later, twenty-one rockets landed in the huge American diplomatic compound in Baghdad. According to a Trump tweet, the missiles came from Iran, but US Central Command attributed the launch to a "rogue" Iranian-backed militia. The national security cabinet met at the White House on December 23 and finalized options that were to be presented to Trump. Dire warnings from the White House soon followed, yet cooler heads prevailed.

Biden was Obama's point man on Iraq, and Tony Blinken, the new secretary of state, was Biden's point man. They understand Iraq and its problems well and know many Iraqi politicians. Unlike Trump, who regarded Iraq as enemy territory and believed its people to be in thrall to Iranian clerics, Biden has a more nuanced view and is likely to avoid taking steps that weaken the Baghdad government's credibility by infringing on its sovereignty or demonstrating callous disregard for Iraqi lives, as Trump did by pardoning the Americans convicted of murdering seventeen civilians in 2007. Biden's advisers were also directly involved in the Iran nuclear talks, so unlike Trump's, they have intensive experience negotiating with Iranians.

The other event that reshaped the Middle East during the Trump administration was the signing of the Abraham Accords by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, then by Bahrain, a Saudi client state; Sudan; and Morocco, which has long-standing informal ties with Israel. Precisely how these accords have recast the landscape Biden inherited is unclear. Like US-Soviet arms control agreements of a bygone era, they reflect and codify existing realities rather than create new ones. Israel has sought a diplomatic foothold in the Gulf since the mid-1990s, when it opened a trade office in Doha, the capital of Qatar, during the false dawn of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians, and the Emiratis became more receptive to Israel with the ascent of a new generation of leaders unshackled from a reflexive allegiance to the Palestinian cause. Although both Israel and the UAE have guarded their security ties carefully over the years, Americans doing business in the UAE have often bumped into Israelis thought to have defense or intelligence connections. There have been hiccups in the relationship, but on the whole it has worked, while being something of an open secret.

Both countries perceive Iran as an enemy but also feel threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas is an offshoot of that organization, which makes the Brotherhood especially suspect in Israeli eyes. And as a transnational group advocating both democracy of a limited sort and Islamic law, the Brotherhood is anathema to the UAE, which is

attempting to secularize while maintaining an authoritarian system. But the UAE is not looking for a war with Iran and will not be eager to host Israeli forces determined to fight one. Given that Israeli and Emirati interests before the signing of the Abraham Accords were largely addressed through tacit arrangements, the explanation for the UAE's motive probably lies in the threat posed by Israeli annexation of parts or all of the West Bank. The UAE understood that Israel would defer this in return for diplomatic recognition. There was also the question of money. An experienced investor explained to me that the trade relations made possible by the Abraham Accords will make many Israelis rich and many Emiratis richer. According to Israel's finance ministry, formal trade between the countries will grow from virtually nothing to \$500 million in a few years. This is not earthshaking, but if the UAE is able to acquire major Israeli tactical systems, such as the Iron Dome anti-missile launcher, the number could be much higher. In the meantime, Israeli tourists, long excluded from visiting much of the Arab world, have descended on the malls of Dubai in large numbers.

The Trump administration offered incentives to the Arab countries to sign the Abraham Accords. To the UAE, it was acquisition of the F-35 stealth aircraft. Typically, this would not have been possible because the planes would undercut Israel's qualitative military edge, which is guaranteed by US domestic law. Trump also appears to have offered the prospect of sophisticated Growler electronic warfare aircraft and long-range Reaper drones. Prime Minister Netanyahu privately assured Trump that the sale of F-35s would not be an issue, but Benny Gantz, the "alternate" prime minister, and Israeli military and intelligence officials challenged Netanyahu on this. Leading Republicans and Democrats in the Senate and House unsuccessfully opposed the sale because of the threat the aircraft could pose to Israel. The controversy is puzzling because the UAE and Israel have signed a peace treaty and have no plausible differences that might lead either to abrogate it. The only explanation is suspicion about the possibility of a coup in the UAE that would put an enemy of Israel on the throne, but this is a vanishingly remote contingency.

Morocco was persuaded to sign the accords by a shocking reversal of the US position on Western Sahara, a territory Morocco has claimed for years in defiance of the wishes of the tribes living there. After long insisting that the status of the territory had to be negotiated, the US endorsed Rabat's control of it. Washington won over Sudan by dropping it from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. Bahrain, nominally independent of Saudi Arabia, signed the accords with the presumed tacit approval of the crown prince, since King Salman's opposition to a treaty with Israel in the absence of progress on Palestinian rights has blocked his freedom of action.

The Biden administration therefore needs to figure out how best to restore the pre-Trump status quo with Iran, what if any benefits it can extract from the Abraham Accords, whether to adjust its military and diplomatic posture in the Persian Gulf, and what to do about Syria, which Turkey, Iran, Israel, Russia, the US, and an assortment of jihadists are picking apart while its population starves.

Biden has declared his intention to reenter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the Iran nuclear deal is known. He could leverage the economic pain that Trump imposed on Iran by insisting that Tehran consent to discuss a follow-on agreement that would curtail its “malign activities” in the region and its production of ballistic missiles, while extending the duration of its nonpermanent obligations beyond the period stipulated by the JCPOA. Iran has already rejected direct talks with the US to revive the current agreement but, the administration’s thinking goes, it might be sufficiently eager for sanctions relief that talks about future talks would be seen as a small price to pay.

The fact is, follow-on negotiations would entitle Iran to raise issues of its own. When the US brings up its ballistic missile capability, Tehran will no doubt point to the UAE’s F-35s and offer to consider limitations on Iranian missiles in return for corresponding limits on the UAE air force. US accusations of malign activities in Syria will be met with the observation that Iran is helping Syria at its government’s request; who, the Iranians will ask, invited the US? And what right does the US have to seize Syrian oilfields and hand them to Delta Crescent Energy LLC, an obscure American firm? Who backed a brutal Saudi air campaign in Yemen? Who violated Iraqi sovereignty by killing a senior Iranian official visiting Iraq? Iranian negotiators would also observe that most arms-control agreements have a sunset provision and that the US has an impressive track record of withdrawing from them.

The lyrics of this opera have already been written; an endless performance devoid of crescendos would suit Iranian negotiators perfectly well, and confronting Iran on these contentious issues would placate some American and Israeli critics of the JCPOA. Since many of its provisions do not expire until 2030 and others sunset in 2025, after the end of Biden’s first term, both sides have time to temporize. The Iranians will be especially cautious, since Trump has already suggested that he may be the Republican presidential candidate again in 2024. They will not kid themselves that whatever they agree to with Biden will survive past his term in office.

If, however, the Biden administration succeeds in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, it would reduce the risk of a regional war and nuclear proliferation on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf. Iranian malign activities are not a threat to the United States, but they trouble some of its friends, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia. These

activities include attacks on Saudi oil facilities; occasional launchings of Iranian missiles by Houthi rebels at Saudi Arabia, presumably in response to Saudi airstrikes (although the Saudis would argue that the Houthis started the tit-for-tat attacks); entrenching Shi'a militias in Syria, used mainly by the government as cannon fodder in a fading civil war; and attempting to transfer advanced missiles to Lebanese Hezbollah.

Nearly all these provocations were made possible by US blunders or those of its allies, and all have proven difficult to reverse militarily. Iran's grip on Lebanon originated in a failed US-Israeli war against Syria in the early 1980s. Its presence in Iraq was made possible by the wars against Saddam Hussein from 1991 to 2003 and the ensuing conflict there. Iran's involvement in Yemen was made possible by a Saudi and Emirati effort to roll back Houthi gains in a civil war that ravaged the country. Its engagement in Syria was a function of Iran's dependence on Damascus for diplomatic support, resupply of Lebanese Hezbollah, and of course the threat posed by jihadists. Arming and training of rebels by the US and Gulf Arabs made intervention a more urgent necessity for Tehran.

The Biden administration lacks the strategic incentive and domestic political support to dislodge Iran from its various regional footholds, which will continue to galvanize opposition to the nuclear agreement. Given constraints on the administration and the needs of the countries where Iranian influence has become entrenched, it would seem logical to mobilize Arab capital and simply outspend Iran, which is economically weak and organizationally challenged. Iran can support militias, but these states need stabilization and reconstruction assistance in addition to direct investment. Tehran can organize soup kitchens and build small schools in the war-torn Syrian city of Deir al-Zour, renovate a couple of power stations that other contractors were blocked from bidding on because of US sanctions, and even ship discounted oil to Syria if it can penetrate the US blockade, but it cannot rebuild the country's energy grid, replace its health care system, reconstitute its housing stock, and resuscitate its transport sector.

The Gulf states have the resources and motivation to do this. Ironically, investment aimed at crowding Iran out of Syria and alleviating a humanitarian crisis is currently blocked by US sanctions against non-American entities engaged in financial transactions in Syria. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are already shoveling cash to the Assad government, which can't use it for investment because of sanctions. If Arab clout in Syria grew, Iranian influence would diminish over time.

Iraq could benefit from investment in its agribusiness, industrial, and oil sectors; Yemen desperately needs investment in infrastructure and desalination capacity—it is out of water—and while Iran can supply

the Houthis with missiles and rockets, it cannot meaningfully improve the quality of life for Yemenis. Lebanon is in a state of profound crisis caused by the collapse of a banking sector structured as a pyramid scheme. Its reconstitution will be a serious challenge, and Iran has no capacity to prevent Lebanon from going over the precipice. A regional initiative of this kind could take US-Saudi relations in a productive direction, while chipping away at the rationale for armed conflict with Iran.

Alternative approaches either carry the risk of escalation with Iran or entail a break with the Saudis, regardless of the administration's stated intention to avoid a "rupture" with Riyadh. Either course of action would be controversial in Washington. Despite disgust at the crown prince, mainly among Democrats, since the murder of his critic Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in 2018, the Saudi connection throws off too much cash to derail. In 2019 US trade with Saudi Arabia was about \$39 billion. In 2015, the last year employment data were available, sales of US goods and services to Saudi Arabia supported 165,000 American jobs. This activity has strengthened an already strong business constituency for close US-Saudi ties. The kingdom has reinforced this base of support by spending over \$37 million lobbying in Washington; funded, along with the UAE, a multimillion-dollar think tank; and invested more than \$1 billion in the US tech sector, while endowing universities and hospitals.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, has rightly repudiated the "blank check" Trump handed to Mohammad bin Salman, which implicitly condoned murder, kidnapping, domestic repression, the siege of Qatar, and indiscriminate bombing of Yemeni civilians, but the inertia of the US-Saudi relationship will impede meaningful change. The Biden administration has restricted its communication with Saudi Arabia to King Salman and refused to talk to the crown prince, initiated a review of arms sales, cut off US support for Saudi operations in Yemen, and taken the Houthis off the US list of terrorist organizations. It has also released a redacted version of the intelligence assessment that the crown prince was deeply involved in Khashoggi's murder.

Yet according to *The New York Times*, "the Biden administration stopped short of directly penalizing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, calculating that the risk of damaging American interests was too great." Biden explained on February 4:

Saudi Arabia faces missile attacks, UAV strikes, and other threats from Iranian-supplied forces in multiple countries. We're going to continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people.

He did not mention that the US was currently seeking new bases in Saudi Arabia, probably to get out of Iranian missile and drone range, which would make this a particularly inopportune moment to anathematize the crown prince. Advocates of harsher action think it would coalesce internal Saudi opposition to his accession to the throne upon his father's death. If nothing else, this view shows the supernatural staying power of regime change fantasies. But some congressional Democrats do not think the administration has gone far enough, and prominent journalists, include the *Times's* Nicholas Kristof and *The New Yorker's* Robin Wright, have denounced Biden for giving the crown prince a pass.

Under the Biden administration the US-Israeli relationship will shed the excesses it acquired under Trump, who appointed as ambassador David Friedman, a Trump Organization lawyer strongly supportive of settlers and annexation of occupied territory. Biden has already reversed policies that stripped Palestinians of aid and diplomatic access in Washington, and he likely won't have to confront Israel on the question of annexation as long as Jerusalem sees value in perpetuating the Abraham Accords. Security assistance is locked in throughout Biden's first term by the ten-year Memorandum of Understanding signed by Obama in 2016. Side payments requested by Israel might be granted if Congress senses political dividends, and Israel has already asked for a compensatory package that would offset the alleged impact of F-35 sales to the UAE on Israel's military advantage. For the most part, the systems Israel wants to buy with US assistance—such as refueling tankers, vertical landing and takeoff aircraft, and a bunker-busting bomb that is too heavy for any Israeli plane to carry—would be needed for it to attack Iran. This might presage a future request for strategic bombers, the sale of which is currently prohibited by a US-Russian arms control treaty.

Relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority will not be improved early in the Biden administration, if at all, because Israel is holding elections on March 23, amid the wreckage of the center-left Blue and White party and the emergence of a right-wing challenger to Netanyahu, Gideon Sa'ar. Netanyahu faces criminal charges that will soon consume much of his time, but this does not seem to have alienated his base. Since whoever wins will not pursue a peace agreement with the Palestinians, Biden's advisers are unlikely to enmesh the White House in yet another push for a peace process. At this juncture, the bureaucrats who had dominated the peace process for a generation are all gone. The new generation is more skeptical of the process and the viability of a two-state solution, even if they still think it would be better than the obvious alternatives. Thus, at least in relation to this US interest, the outcome of the Israeli election won't matter much to Washington policymakers. Right-wing parties will win two thirds to three quarters of Knesset seats, no Israeli government will back a return to the JCPOA, and even Benny Gantz, the Blue and White party leader, spoke favorably about annexation.

On US-Iran relations, Netanyahu came out swinging soon after Biden's election, warning the president-elect that "there can be no going back to the previous nuclear agreement." He reprised his denunciation of Obama's nuclear diplomacy, delivered to a joint session of Congress in March 2015. Since then, Israel has coarsened and toughened the tone and substance of its opposition. Netanyahu recently warned that "with or without an agreement we will do everything so [Iran is not] armed with nuclear weapons." He was underscoring the astonishing public statement of Lieutenant General Avi Kochavi, Israel's chief military officer, to the effect that Israel could respond to US reentry into the JCPOA by attacking Iran because "anything resembling the current agreement is bad and must not be permitted." The former Israeli air force chief Amos Yadlin, who heads a think tank generally regarded as left of center, has just echoed this notion in an article cowritten with an Emirati analyst.² There are countervailing voices in Israel, primarily retired intelligence officials and army officers, but opponents of the JCPOA dominate the discussion. They will enjoy the warm welcome of congressional Republicans, who are looking forward to using them once again as a political wrecking ball.

There is little Biden can do to counter this aggressive campaign, though it is clear he will try. The US airstrike against Iran-backed militia camps in Syria on February 25 was a gesture to those who claim the nuclear deal does nothing to interdict or punish Iran's malign activities, such as the militia attack against a US installation in Iraq on February 15. Official US statements explained the strike as a signal of the administration's intention to protect American lives and deter Iranian aggression. Sources in Syria indicated that the US aircraft buzzed the targeted location repeatedly before releasing their bombs, to give residents the opportunity to get out of the way. Trump also attacked Iranian-backed militia groups within Iraq, not a step that Biden would likely take. Syria, however, is a multilateral free-fire zone and therefore a less awkward punching bag.

Despite this attempt to control escalation by avoiding a strike on Iraqi territory, keeping the scope proportional to the provocation, and apparently seeking to avoid casualties, a US base in Iraq came under retaliatory fire on March 3. This has created expectations among observers of a US response and given opponents of the JCPOA an opening to press their claim that US declarations of interest in rejoining the agreement only embolden Iran. The implication is that any US response should be directed at Iran itself. It has therefore become important for the administration to put some distance between Tehran and these attacks by dropping the old designation "Iran-backed militias" in favor of "Shia-backed militias." JCPOA opponents cravenly and cynically denounced this as craven and cynical, while the Twittersphere ignited with hilarity. The underlying question, however, was serious and hard to answer: Are the militias that attack US bases in Iraq following Iranian orders, or even subject to Iranian influence?

In any case, it seems



Joe Biden; drawing by Tom Bachtell

scarcely likely that this effort to balance attacks on these militias against the need to keep Iran motivated to reenter compliance with the JCPOA will work. Oklahoma Republican senator Jim Inhofe, author of *The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future*, declared on February 1 that a return to the JCPOA is a nonstarter. Saying that “the original Iran deal, after all, was a gift to the Iranian regime,” he laid out the principles for a new deal that would be acceptable to Republicans. It would involve the participation of Israel and Arab Gulf States, have no sunset clauses, include no provision for enrichment, and end Iranian development of ballistic missiles and regional meddling. In other words, congressional Republicans will not support any deal that could actually be negotiated with Iran, and some Democrats may well embrace this position. As a purely executive action, US participation in the JCPOA will remain a fragile proposition.

The Israelis, meanwhile, appear to have reversed their previous insistence that a new agreement encompass regional security concerns; they now say that these should be dealt with separately from nuclear issues. This must have caused whiplash in Washington. The Israelis, paradoxically, also seem to be taking a relaxed attitude toward Iran’s ability to race for a bomb. To justify a rapid return to the JCPOA, Biden administration officials have said that Iran could make enough fuel for a weapon very quickly in the absence of diplomatic progress. The Israelis have countered that rapid assembly of the fuel for a deliverable warhead might be possible, but it would still take Iran a couple of years to make one, so why the rush to return to talks?

Biden says the US will not resume negotiations or relieve sanctions until Iran is back in compliance with the existing agreement; Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, maintains that Iran will not resume compliance until the US has lifted sanctions. Most observers think the stakes are high enough for both parties to find a way back to the negotiating table. There are many options available, including a partial lifting of Trump-era sanctions, or an IMF loan, in return for a partial return by Iran to full compliance. Iran, after the US airstrike in Syria, rejected direct talks with the administration, but other formats would work nearly as well.

In her confirmation hearing Wendy Sherman, Biden's nominee for deputy secretary of state and a lead negotiator of the JCPOA, adopted the language of her tormenters, stressing that the "the facts on the ground have changed, the geopolitics of the region have changed" and suggesting that the JCPOA would have to be revised to reflect this new world. She gave no sign that the administration would drop Trump's "maximum pressure" sanctions in advance of Iran's return to full compliance. As Democratic progressives noted, Sherman sounded as though she were repudiating the deal she had negotiated and strenuously defended. But co-opting her adversaries' rhetoric was probably the safest course in a highly volatile situation. In June Iran will hold presidential elections that will probably result in the replacement of Hassan Rouhani with a hard-liner hostile to the nuclear deal. Timing is therefore an issue.

As for Syria, Blinken has expressed his regret at Obama's having failed to stanch the civil war that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives and forced the migration of half the country's population, saying "it's something that I will take with me for the rest of my life." The question is how Blinken's regret will shape US policy. Remorse over George H.W. Bush's incitement and abandonment of Iraqi Shias in 1991 filled Paul Wolfowitz and others with regret that later drove them toward a second war with Saddam Hussein. Thus far, Blinken has spoken of more energetic US diplomacy aimed at a political transition in Syria. This is all to the good, but leaves unanswered how US policy will address the welfare of the Syrian people during this transition, which could take years. Does the US pulverize Syrian society with sanctions, as it did in Iraq between Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom? Or does it roll back current sanctions to allow reconstruction and stabilization operations to be conducted by non-Americans even though they will in effect benefit a murderous regime? This is a profound ethical challenge that Biden will have to navigate.

The new administration will be assailed from the right and the left. On one side there will be the primacists insisting on American leadership. Primacy and leadership in foreign affairs are fine things in principle, but they are not cost-free, and the administration will need to think about what it is willing to pay for them and whether they are even attainable. On the other side is the campaign against "endless wars"

that appear to have finally ended, at least in the Middle East. Even the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has mused publicly about closing or shrinking the American presence in Manama, the site of the headquarters of the navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. And as troops are drawn down from Iraq and Afghanistan, the numbers of support personnel in the Persian Gulf will also diminish.

In Congress there is bipartisan interest in repealing the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), which authorized the president "to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq." Because both ISIS and Iran have a presence in Iraq and pose a threat to the US, the 2002 AUMF could be used to justify military operations in Syria and the killing of Qassim Soleimani. Revision of the 2001 AUMF, which authorized the war on terror, is also under consideration.

Republicans were not notably in favor of this when Trump was president. Their interest in hamstringing Biden practically glows in the dark. The support of Democrats reflects pent-up frustration with the forever wars and a reluctance to see the Biden White House distracted by skirmishes overseas when there is much to do at home. And they must surely hope that whatever constraints they apply to Biden will apply as well to his Republican successors. Hope springs eternal.

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1. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016. ↩
2. Amos Yadlin and Ebtessam al-Ketbi, "The United States Must Move Forward, Not Back, on Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January 27, 2021. ↩